

Event: A New Lease on Life: Rental Housing in 20th Century Toronto
Date: Thursday, March 25, 2010
Time: 5:30 to 7:30 p.m.
Location: City of Toronto Archives, 255 Spadina Rd. (between Dupont and Davenport)

Speaking Notes

Keiko Nakamura, CEO, Toronto Community Housing

Good evening everyone.

It was Pearl S. Buck who wrote:

“If you want to understand today, you have to search yesterday.”

The City of Toronto has a long commitment to good housing for its citizens. Toronto has had a publicly owned housing for over 100 years. The Toronto Housing Authority built workers' housing in 1913, which was converted to the Bain Coop in the 1970s.

As with all municipalities, Toronto is responsible for putting order into housing development with zoning and regulations. But Toronto has also led the way to actually provide housing. It has innovated and learned from its experience through a century and over 100,000 units of not-for-profit housing. Publically owned, non-profit and cooperative housing has not only been Toronto's way to supply quality housing for low and moderate-income households and most vulnerable citizens but also the instrument of urban renewal that has benefitted the whole city.

Toronto Community Housing Corp holds the legacy of that century of buildings and experience. Toronto Community Housing owns and manages over 58,000 units, and private non-profit and cooperative providers another 40,000 units.

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Toronto is recognized worldwide for its leadership, innovation, and commitment to housing in response to the changing needs of its citizens. After the workers' housing, in the post-WWII period, Toronto again led the way with financing of the original Regent Park north in 1947. It was totally financed by a referendum of Toronto's citizens to take on the debt. Regent Park was built and became Canada's first and largest social housing project with 732 housing units and over 10,000 people living there by 1960.

It became the model, and Regent Park south followed financed by Federal and Provincial programs. Housing units surrounded large courtyards that contained extensive greenery. Even though Regent Park had a vibrant community life and was home to hundreds of families, the problem with the design was that it segregated the community from the rest of the city.

In the 1970s, Toronto learned and led the way with a new model - the St. Lawrence neighbourhood - mixed income, mixed tenure communities. St. Lawrence became the icon for successful urban renewal. The last quarter of the 20th century also saw development of private non-profit and cooperative housing that fit into neighbourhoods and provided housing for people with low-income and needing supports to live independently and integrated into Toronto's neighbourhoods.

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And in this new millennium, Toronto and Toronto Community Housing is following this path of learning and innovation in response to the needs of Toronto's citizens for good housing. To create the new Regent Park, we worked extensively with community partners, spoke to developers around the world and consulted with more than 2,000 tenants. The new vision goes beyond replacing housing in a poor state of repair; it will create quality housing as well as new amenities, jobs and retail. With a mix of market and rent-geared-to-income housing, Regent Park will be a community of social inclusion.

In phase one of the Regent Park revitalization, we introduced the first bank on the Regent Park footprint with the Royal Bank's new branch at Dundas and Parliament. We are partnering with the Federal, Provincial and Municipal governments and a community partner in Artscape to create a new Regent Park Arts and Cultural Centre. And we look forward to a new grocery store, a central park, an aquatics centre, a new community centre and new daycare spaces.

All of this activity will create new jobs for tenants. During the construction phase, we exceeded our target of having 10 per cent of jobs staffed by residents of Regent Park.

We now look forward to the revitalization of Lawrence Heights Community in the North of our City. A twenty year project involving tenants, the city and surrounding community.

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Toronto Community Housing is proud to carry on this commitment to innovation and excellence in facing the challenge of providing good housing for the citizens of Toronto.

The City of Toronto's Archives have always done a fantastic job of telling the story of this city and its people. It is my hope, as Toronto Community Housing CEO, that 20 years, 50 years, and 100 years from now, they don't just tell the story of the transformation of Regent Park. I hope they tell the story of how Regent Park was the first of many community revitalizations all across Toronto, improving the quality of life for tenants, and creating a stronger city for us all.

Thank you everyone for coming. Thank you City Archivist Karen Teeple and your talented staff for organizing this event. Have a great evening.

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